

Hullabaloo in the Tree

Hanif Kureishi

"Come along now!"

The father, having had enough, decided it was time they all left the playground.

A week ago, in this park, they had run into an Indian friend, a doctor, who'd been shocked by the disrespect and indiscipline of the father's children. The second seven-year old twin, the one in the Indiana Jones hat, had said to the doctor friend, "What are you - an idiot?"

The father had had to apologise.

"They are speaking to everyone like this?" the friend had said to the father. "I know we live here now, but you have let them become Western, in the worst way!"

No English friend would have presumed to say such a thing, the father had commented, later at home.

"The problem is," replied the kid, "he's a brown face."

The father, furious and agitated ever since, thought he should start being more authoritative.

"We're going!" he said now, in what he considered to be almost his 'sharpest' voice.

He picked up the blue plastic ball, and strode out of the enclosed playground and into the park. The seven-year old twins had been hitting one another with sticks and the two-year old had been flung from the roundabout, scraping his leg.

Still, they would walk across Primrose Hill to a cafe on the other side. The children had been asking for drinks; he wanted coffee. What better way was there to spend Sunday morning in the adult world?

To his surprise, his three sons followed him without complaint. He his friend should have been there to witness such impressive obedience. His wife-to-be had run into an acquaintance and he could see her still chatting, beside the swings. He had already interrupted her once. Why was it that the time he most wanted to talk to her was when she was engaged with someone else?

Outside the playground, in the open park, with the hill rising up in front of him and the sky beyond it, he felt like walking forwards for a long time with his eyes closed, leaving everyone behind, in order, for a bit, to have no thoughts. For years, before his children were born, he seemed to have forfeited Sundays altogether. Now the poses, the attitude, the addictions and, worst of all, the sense of unlimited time, had been replaced by a kind of exhausting chaos and a struggle, in his mind, to work out what he should be doing, and who he had to be to satisfy others.

He didn't walk towards the hill, however, but stood there and held the ball out in front of him.

"Watch, you guys! Pay attention!" he said.

What were fathers for if not to kick balls high into the air while their sons leaned back, exclaiming, "Wow, you've nearly broken through the clouds! How do you do that, daddy!"?

He enjoyed it when, after this display, they grabbed the ball and tried to kick it as he had done. The seven year olds, who lived a few streets away with their mother but were

staying for the weekend, had begun to imitate many of the things he did, some of which he was proud of but also that which was ridiculous or irrelevant, like wearing dark glasses in the evening. When they went out together they resembled the Blues Brothers. Even the two year old had begun to copy the languid way he spoke and the way he lay on the couch, reading the paper. It was like being surrounded by a crowd of venomous cartoonists.

Now the father dropped the ball towards his foot but miskicked it.

"Higher, daddy!" called the two year old. "Up, up, sky!"

The two-year-old had long blonde hair, jaggedly cut by his mother, who leaned over his cot with a torch and scissors while he was asleep. The boy was wearing a nappy, socks, T-shirt and shoes, but had refused to put his trousers on. The father had lacked the heart to force him.

The father jogged across and fetched the ball. Making the most of their attention while he still had it, he screamed, "Giggs, Scholes, Beckham, daddy, daddy, daddy - it's gone in!" and drove the ball as hard and far as he could, before slipping over in the mud.

Some shared silences, particularly those of confusion and disbelief, you never want to end, so rare and involving are they.

The oldest twin set down and opened the small suitcase in which he kept his guns, the books he'd written and a photograph of the Empire State Building. He peered into the tree through the wrong end of his new binoculars.

"It's far, far away, nearly in heaven," he said. "Here, you see."

The father got to his feet. Removing his sunglasses, he was already looking up to where the ball, like an errant crown, was resting on a nest of smallish twigs, at the top of a tree not far from the entrance to the playground.

The two year old said, "Stuck."

"Bloody hell," said the father.

"Bloody bloody," repeated the two year old.

The father glanced towards the playground. His wife-to-be still hadn't emerged.

"Throw things!" he said. One of the older boys picked up a leaf and tossed it backwards over his head. The father said, "Hard things, men! Come on! Together we can do this!"

The twins, who welcomed the pure concentration of a crisis, began to run about gathering stones and conkers. The father did the same. The youngest boy jumped up and down, flinging bits of bark. Soon the air was filled with a hail of firm objects, one of which struck a dog and another the leg of a kid passing on a bicycle. The father picked up one of the twins' metal guns and hurled it wildly into the tree.

"You'll break it," said the son reproachfully. "I only got it yesterday." The father began to march away. "Where are you going?" called the boy.

"I'm not going to hang around here all day!" replied the father. "I need coffee - right now!"

He would leave the cheap plastic ball and, if necessary, buy another one on the way home.

Did he, though, want his sons to see him as the sort of man to kick balls into trees and stroll away? What would he be doing next, dropping twenty pound notes and leaving them on the street because he couldn't be bothered to bend down?

"What are you up to?" His wife-to-be had come out of the playground. She picked

up the youngest child and kissed his eyes. "What has daddy done now?" she said.

The twins were still throwing things, mostly at one another's heads.

"Stop that!" ordered the father, coming back. "Let's have some discipline here!"

"You told us to do it!" said the oldest.

The second twin said, "Don't worry, I'm going up."

Probably the most intrepid of the two older boys, he ran to the base of the tree.

As well as his Indiana Jones hat, the second twin was wearing a rope at his belt 'for lassoing', though the only thing he seemed to catch was the neck of the two-year old, whom otherwise, most of the time, he liked. At six o'clock that morning the father had found him showing the little one his penis, explaining that if he tugged at the end and thought, as he put it, about something 'really horrible, like Catwoman', it would feel 'sweet and sour' and 'quite relaxed'.

The boy was saying, "Push me up, daddy. Push, push, push!"

The father bundled him into the fork of the tree, where he clung on enthusiastically but precariously, like someone who'd been dumped on the back of a horse for the first time.

"Put me up there too," said a girl of about nine, who'd been watching and was now jumping up and down beside him. "I can climb trees!"

The two year old, who had a tooth coming through and whose face was red and constantly wet, said, "Me in tree."

"I can't put the whole lot of you of up there," said the father.

The youngest said, "Daddy go in tree."

"Good idea," said his wife-to-be.

"I'd be up there like a shot," said the father. "But not in this new shirt."

His wife-to-be was laughing. "And not in any month with a 'r' in it."

Unlike most of his male antecedents, the father had never fought in a war, nor had he been called upon for any act of physical bravery. He had often wondered what sort of man he'd be in such circumstances.

"Right," he said. "You'll see!"

They were all watching as the father helped the boy down and clambered into the tree himself. His wife-to-be, who was ten years younger, shoved him with unnecessary roughness from behind, until he was out of reach.

Feeling unusually high up, the father waved grandly like a President in the door of an aeroplane. His family waved back. He extended a foot onto another branch and put his weight onto it. It cracked immediately and gave way; he stepped back to safety, hoping no one had noticed the blood drain from his face.

He might, this Sunday morning, be standing on tip-toe in the fork of a tree, a slip away from hospital and years of pain, but he did notice that he had the quiet attention of his family, without the usual maelstrom of their demands. He thought that however much he missed the peace and irresponsibility of his extended bachelorhood, he had at least learned that life was no good on your own. Next week, though, he was going to America for five months, to do research. He would ring the kids but knew they were likely to say, in the middle of a conversation, "Goodbye, we have to watch the Flintstones," and replace the receiver. When he returned, how different would they be?

Through the buzz of his whirling thoughts, he could hear his wife-to-be's voice.

"Shake it!" she was calling.

"Wiggle it!" shouted one of the boys.

"Go, go, go!" yelled the girl.

"Okay, okay!" he muttered.

At their instigation, he leaned against a fat branch in front of him, grasped it, gritted his teeth, and agitated it. To his surprise and relief there was some commotion in the leaves above him. But he could also see that there was no relation between this activity and the position of the ball, far away.

The nine year old girl was now climbing into the tree with him, reaching out and grasping the belt of his trousers as she levered herself up. If he thought it was getting a little cramped on this junction, she immediately started up into the higher branches, stamping on his fingers as she disappeared.

Soon there was a tremendous shaking, far greater than his own, which brought leaves, twigs, small branches and bark raining onto the joggers, numerous children and an old woman on sticks, who were now staring into the hullabaloo in the tree.

This was a good time, he figured, to abandon his position. He would pick the ball up when the girl knocked it down. In fifteen minutes time he would be eating a buttered croissant and sipping a semi-skimmed decaf latte. He might even be able to look at his newspaper.

"What's going on?"

A man had joined them, holding the hands of two little girls. They were all looking up.

The youngest twin said, "Stupid Daddy was showing off and..."

"All right," said the father.

The man was already removing his jacket and handing it to one of the girls, saying, "Don't worry, I'm here."

The father looked at the man, who was in his late 30s, ruddy faced and unfit looking, wearing thick glasses. He had on a pink ironed shirt and the sort of shoes that people wore to the office.

"It's only a cheap ball," said the father.

"We were just leaving," said the wife-to-be.

The man spat in his palms and rubbed them together. "It's been a long time!"

He hurried towards the tree and climbed into it. He didn't stop at the fork, but kept moving up, greeting the girl, who was a little ahead of him, and then, on his hands and knees, scrambling beyond her, into the flimsier branches.

"I'm coming to get you ball...just you wait...ball..." he said as he went.

Like the father and the girl, he shook the tree continuously. He was surprisingly strong and this time the tree seemed to be exploding.

Below, the crowd shielded their faces or stepped back from the storm of detritus but they didn't stop looking and voicing their encouragement.

"What if he breaks his neck?" said the wife-to-be.

"I'll try and catch him," said the father, moving to another position.

The father remembered his own father, Papa, in the street outside their house in the evening, after tea, when they'd first bought a car. Like a lot of men then, particularly those who fancied themselves as intellectuals, Papa was proud of his practical uselessness. Nevertheless, Papa could, at least, open the bonnet of his car, secure it and stare into it, looking mystified.

He knew that this act would, somehow, draw out numerous men from neighbouring houses, some just finishing their 'tea'. Papa, an immigrant, the subject of curiosity, comment and, sometimes, abuse, would soon have these men - civil servants, clerks, shop owners, printers or milkmen - united in rolling up their sleeves, grumbling, lighting cigarettes, and offering technical opinions.

They would remain out in the street long after dark, fetching tools and lying on their backs in patches of grease, Papa's immigrant helplessness drawing their assistance.

The father had loved being out on the street with Papa. From a large Indian family, Papa had never thought of children as an obstacle, or nuisance. They were everywhere, and part of life.

The three pale boys, Papa's grandchildren, born after he'd died, were looking up at the helpful man in the tree and the ball, where it sat in its familiar position. Had the ball had a face, it would have been smiling for, as the man agitated the tree, it rose and fell like a small boat sitting comfortably on a lilting wave.

The man, by now straddling a swaying bough, twisted and broke off a long thin branch. At full stretch, he used it to jab at the ball which, by now, was bobbing a little. At last, after a final poke, it was out and falling.

The children ran towards it.

"Ball, ball!" cried the youngest.

The wife-to-be began to gather the children's things.

The man jumped down out of the tree with his arms raised in triumph. His shirt, which was hanging out, was covered in thick black marks; his hands were filthy, his shoes were scuffed, but he looked ecstatic.

One of his daughters handed him his jacket. The father's wife-to-be tried to wipe him down.

"I loved that," he said. "Thanks."

The two men shook hands.

The father picked up the ball and threw it to the youngest child, who kicked it.

Soon the family caravan was making its way across the park with their bikes, guns, hats, the youngest's sit-in car, a bag of nappies, a pair of binoculars [in the suitcase], and the unharmed plastic ball. The children, laughing and shoving one another, were discussing their 'adventure'.

The father looked around, afraid but also hoping his Indian friend had come to the park today. By now he had something to say. If children, like desire, broke up that which seemed settled, it was a virtue. Much as he might want to, he couldn't bring up his kids by strict rules or a system. He could only do it, as people seemed to do most things in the end, according to the way he was, the way he lived in the world, as an example and guide. This was harder than pretending to be an authority, but more true.

Now, at the far side of the park, as the children went out through the gate, the father turned to look back at the dishevelled tree in the distance. How small it seemed now! It had been agitated but not broken. He would think of it each time he returned to the park; he would think about something good that had happened on the way to somewhere else.